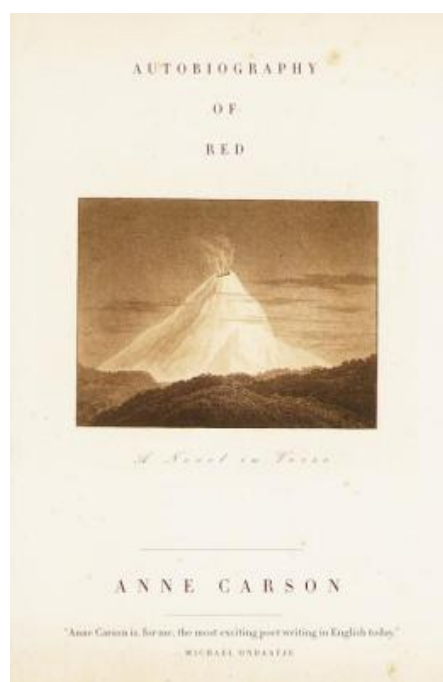




Autobiography of Red

Anne Carson

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Autobiography of Red Anne Carson

The award-winning poet Anne Carson reinvents a genre in *Autobiography of Red*, a stunning work that is both a novel and a poem, both an unconventional re-creation of an ancient Greek myth and a wholly original coming-of-age story set in the present.

Geryon, a young boy who is also a winged red monster, reveals the volcanic terrain of his fragile, tormented soul in an autobiography he begins at the age of five. As he grows older, Geryon escapes his abusive brother and affectionate but ineffectual mother, finding solace behind the lens of his camera and in the arms of a young man named Herakles, a cavalier drifter who leaves him at the peak of infatuation. When Herakles reappears years later, Geryon confronts again the pain of his desire and embarks on a journey that will unleash his creative imagination to its fullest extent. By turns whimsical and haunting, erudite and accessible, richly layered and deceptively simple, *Autobiography of Red* is a profoundly moving portrait of an artist coming to terms with the fantastic accident of who he is.

"A profound love story . . . sensuous and funny, poignant, musical and tender."--The New York Times Book Review

"A deeply odd and immensely engaging book. . . . [Carson] exposes with passionate force the mythic underlying the explosive everyday." --The Village Voice

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK OF THE YEAR

National book Critics Circle Award Finalist

Autobiography of Red Details

Date : Published July 27th 1999 by Vintage (first published March 31st 1998)

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Author : Anne Carson

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From Reader Review Autobiography of Red for online ebook

Ellie says

Sometimes I read a work that is so complete that I don't want to write a review. Autobiography of Red by Anne Carson is that kind of book.

A retelling of the story of Geryon, a red-winged monster who has a short but painful affair with Heracles that reverberates through his life.

What struck me was Geryon's unending effort to make art out of his life-first through writing, even as a child before he could actually write, and then as a photographer. Geryon's life is painful but he constantly searches to give it meaning, to find meaning in the world around him.

The poetry is powerful and the story disturbing. I loved this text but I think I would have to read it several more times before I could begin to write a real review.

It's a volume well worth re-reading.

Jeff Jackson says

This was surprisingly engaging, emotional, and compulsively plot-driven. I've found other Carson texts occasionally too knotty and the first 20 pages made it seem like this was more of the same. But the importance of the set-up soon becomes clear and gives way to a poetically charged and compelling coming-of-age story that seamlessly mixes modern life with Greek legend. There are lots of wonderful reviews for this, so the only thing I'll add is that if you've been hesitating DON'T BE DAUNTED. Take the first 20 pages on faith and you'll be rewarded immediately thereafter.

Jason says

Upon rereading, from 4 stars to 5. I was either a bad reader when I first read this or just not in the right place. In any case, Carson is a master and I don't think I could live without her now.

"Then he met Herakles and the kingdoms of his life all shifted down a few notches. / They were two superior eels / at the bottom of the tank and they recognized each other like italics."

Mariel says

What do they think about? Floating in there. All night.

Nothing.

That's impossible.

Why?

You can't be alive and think about nothing. You can't but you're not a whale.

Why would it be different?
Why should it be the same? But I look in their eyes and I see them thinking.
Nonsense. It is yourself you see- it's guilt.
Guilt? Why would I be guilty about whales? Not my fault they're in a tank.
Exactly. So why are you guilty- whose tank are you in?

Australian goodreader Sean (account since nuked, sadly) wrote a review of Garden, Ashes (a wonderful book) on Christmas. He said it was his "Christmas miracle", saving the day. That had made me smile because I had felt that way about Anne Carson's Autobiography of Red. It may seem a bit weird to write that now because days after it have needed "saving". Some kind of weight on the empty place. It doesn't matter. It is enough to have it when I can have it. In the end he gets to fly, to swim. I just breathed. If you have to know how to look at it then I can look at it refracted through them. Just don't stop doing that.

We are amazing beings,
Geryon is thinking. We are neighbors of fire.
And now time is rushing towards them
where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality on their faces, night at their back.

Geryon is a little boy and he goes to his mother. He stays by her side. They are up all night. They make dinner. They turn on every light in the house. Geryon saves the voices his mother makes when she reads to him. He keeps them safe by allowing the babysitter to read in voices she cannot get wrong, because they are not his mother's voices. She comes home to him when he is awake. He must have forgotten to stay awake for her. Would it ever be warmer than this. Days turn into nights and secrets. He meets him. Herakles on his red wing tips carrying dust. Folding back arms for a hug. She still folds his t-shirts. Mother can hug him no more. I wanted him to stay in that kitchen with his mother but he couldn't. I wonder if she turns on lights without him, or just watches the empty fruit bowl. Still life painting without the life subject. Geryon always cries when they make love. Herakles couldn't wait forever. He's so impatient I wonder if he's just waiting to get old. When he's old he'll be impatient to be young. Herakles hides on his grandmother's porch. I imagine he uses his grandmother as something of his own when he wants to shut out. He would use her as something of his own, like a secret, when he wants to invite in. This is where I live, my family, my end of the sofa. Geryon floats. Suspenders under his coat, wings kept in, he flies above the land to where the Nazis and Argentinians live. He studies volcanoes. Mountains with left over ashes and fires to be started kept within. Herakles comes back. Herakles has Ancash. Paintings that look like something from far away. When you get up close he is back in your bed. I wouldn't want to be in love with Herakles. I would be afraid to dance like Angela on My So-Called Life (to "Tears of the Sun") when she believes she's finally over Jordan Catalano. It's a dance to convince oneself. It's a denial and the only thing you can do. Don't want to find out if you're wrong. Geryon is close to the mountain. He could jump in, if he doesn't learn another place. He could have made a sacrifice. Autobiography of Red was my Christmas miracle when Geryon is okay without Herakles. I really needed that. No one can kill your red dog or anything if you can be okay with yourself. It's something about not wanting anyone else's secret. There is no power there anymore. Something about not living in dreams. Or maybe it was his new boyfriend sitting up in the cold outside. Would you look into the beluga whales and see only yourself in the tank or just wish they could swim and keep on. I'd put something with wings on top of that Christmas tree and light all the candles for that.

Khashayar Mohammadi says

A truly unique poetic experience. An important milestone for the verse novel. An idiosyncratic, fantastic (in the purest sense of the word) tale that explores the most important issues of our society from a somewhat comedic and surreal perspective. One of the great classics of Canadian poetry.

brian says

if you no like this book, i no like you

Miriam says

Seldom have I seen a writer so maximize the balance between raw, grated, difficult, emotional pain and beautiful words that make me want to clutch them to my bosom and squeeze them with delight while making burbling noises of pleasure.

Thomas says

One of those books that everyone else loves and I just did not get, oops. *Autobiography of Red* has so many things I find relatable and should have liked more: a main character who experienced abuse in his childhood, a queer love story, and a plot that features the importance of art. Unfortunately this novel in verse did not resonate with me. I wanted more character development and a more substantial plot. Perhaps I do not "get" poetry or I have been spoiled by my favorite gay novels, including *A Little Life* and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Even though I did not love this one I am glad others did.

Neal Adolph says

In my short life I have learned that short novels need to be read for as long as they can be. Then the good ones should be reread. This is a challenge. These short novels masquerade themselves as something that you can appreciate in a few hours of reading. Yes, you can read *The Lover* in an afternoon, or *The Hour of the Star* in a few hours on a park bench with a good coffee in hand, or you can sit with *The Crying of Lot 49* one Tuesday evening and get through it all. If you have the ability to handle the cruelty, almost anything by Coetzee can be easily consumed in a single sitting with Glenn Gould's two recordings of the Goldberg Variations playing in the background. Yes, you can even enjoy them in that time. This is true. But I must give myself some space to contradict myself here. None of these books can be read in a few hours. Short novels are the hardest novels to write, they need space to breathe between rapturous reading sessions. They deserve time to become themselves in the same way that larger novels do. The good ones count among some of the best works of written words - give them life by giving them more time than they need.

I haven't done this yet with Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, though I did give it more than a week to grow and become something that lived with me for a while. That's a long time for a book that is only 150 pages long, and in poetry-ish form, and so those pages aren't all that full. I'll read it again though. This is a

beautiful book, short story, poem, that deserves that extra time and extra effort. And it will reveal itself all the more.

Some reviews on GoodReads have gone to the trouble of capturing a perfect excerpt of writing from Red's story. I haven't done that - I've never done that for any of my reviews, though I have written some of these lines in a notebook I've reserved for wonderful writing from books which range from good to bad. Go read some of these excerpts. They won't make sense to you now. But come back after having finished the story, book, poem, and you will recall that moment perfectly. It will likely have a stronger impact than it did when you first read it, or when you read through the poem chapter a second time to make sense of whatever emotion it was that you felt in that flicker. Something about this prose drills into your brain.

Which is interesting in the best way possible.

This is a simple coming-of-age story, where the life of the protagonist, Geryon, is placed in relation with that of Herakles. If you know your ancient Greek poetry these names might mean something to you. They didn't to me. Well, Herakles did, but only because of childhood stories and Disney movies and painted Greek pottery and silly adult erotic fantasies I've acquired about perfect hulking male bodies. Regardless, this simple coming-of-age story, taking for its inspiration ancient Greek epic poems, is as far as possible from being either Ancient or Greek or simple as can be imagined.

It is set in the modern day, in South America and America-ish. It is set in both the real and unreal world, and the line between the two is ubiquitous and invisible.

It is highly original in form and shape and approach.

It is beautifully written. Shockingly well-written. Remarkably well-written.

It is heart-breaking and honest and at times its vulnerability is nothing short of disruptive.

It has profound things to say about relationships and adequacy.

It is humanity and human and monstrous. All of this is important in this poem, short story, novel, but you must figure out why on your own.

I don't cry why I read, because I'm a man and I think that means I can only cry in shower or something like that. And so saying that this book made me cry would be a lie and I don't like to misrepresent either myself or the ways in which twenty-first century masculinity in Saskatchewan has profoundly damaged my ability to be my natural self, but there is a moment in this book that has left me profoundly sad. I related to it far too well. It is captured in one word - which those who have read the poem, short story, novel will recall.

Degrading.

Good lord that word has so much weight. What a monster this book has unleashed!

And the most horrible thing is that the intimacy which makes that word so ugly in this book is a result of those very same silly adult erotic fantasies I've acquired about perfect hulking male bodies. Monstrosity turns me on. Dammit.

The Autobiography of Red is worth a week's worth of reading, deserves a spot on your shelf, and is more than worthy of the second reading that it will certainly end up getting after you set it down and let it breathe and unsettle you. If this isn't a book that is taking up some space in your home, I suggest you go out and pick it up.

mwpm says

I'm reminded of Michael Ondaatje's book of poetry, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The book is a "verse novel" that loosely follows the exploits of Billy the Kid under the pretext that he is the author (though Ondaatje frequently deviates). There are aspects of this in *Autobiography of Red* (as you may have gathered from the title).

The idea, a classic story from another perspective, is more reminiscent of John Gardner's *Grendel* (Beowulf from the perspective of the monster). The same approach has been employed in various modern novels, such as Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* (Baum's Oz series from the perspective of the Wicked Witch).

It is employed here to uncanny effect. I say "uncanny" because the author retains a classical form (like *Billy the Kid* it is "a novel in verse") but sets the action in the twentieth century (unspecified). Something else I liked about the form, the verse portion of the novel (that is the "Autobiography of Red") is established with a fake introduction and appendix. This variation of the epistolary novel is reminiscent of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. But, whereas the poem "Pale Fire" takes up a small portion of the Nabokov's novel and the rest is preoccupied with academic scrutiny, the scrutiny of the "Autobiography of Red" is a small portion of Carson's novel and the rest is dedicated to the so-called text.

The author deviates from the original story in various ways. The Greek Myth, from which the characters have been extracted, is summarized in the introduction. I didn't know the myth but this didn't detract from my reading. Knowing the basics of the myth from the summary made me aware of the author's decision to deviate. For example, the relationship of the central characters in the myth is drastically altered. They do not follow the same course of action. They do not belong to the same world, but they have brought aspects of the mythical world into our world. The monster (Geryon, aka Red) retains his wings. His presence - a red monster in a world of telephones, cigarettes, refrigerators - should be absurd, but is often overlooked. In fact, the other characters don't seem to notice (at least they don't acknowledge). For this reason, the character swings between feeling invisible and feeling like a sore thumb.

This is a curious text. I'm sure it will appeal to those who enjoy formal experimentation (along the lines of *Pale Fire*, *House of Leaves*, *L'Abbe C*). It may also appeal to those who are interested in classical mythology, taking into consideration that the story is a departure.

Kathryn says

I liked this very much. The entire work is perfection, with the exception of the evasive ending. The awe I felt while reading was lessened due to this, which makes me very sad as this is a beautiful and heartwrenching book. I really wish it had ended with a stronger conclusion.

This book managed to smack against my ick wall pretty early. Umm, yeah, I am so not qualified to write a review or anything resembling a review about this book.

I found the book accessible yet distant, dreamy but familiar. Carson wrote in a tone I am unused to but learned to love quickly. The author crawled into her character's head and grasped so much, understood so much of what it is to be young, in lust, unsure, and in pain. Geryon is one of the most fascinating characters I have ever read. He saw the world unlike anyone else in the book. For example,

*It was the year he began to wonder about the noise that colors make. Roses came roaring across the garden at him.
He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against the window screen...
Why is grass called blades? he asked them. Isn't it because of the clicking?*

Geryon is a romantic, a red monster with wings, lost in the world. I knew before starting that in Greek myth, Geryon was killed by Heracles, a hindrance to the hero completing his tenth labour. Carson included commentary and analysis, at times wry and loosely interpreted, of Stesichorus' incomplete poem about Geryon. Once Carson began her novel in verse, the reader was prepared for a young, humanized character, which Carson was quick to provide a back story for, eliciting deep sympathy from the reader.

This is one of those books I want to buy to have on my shelves so I can periodically take it down and again read one of the many beautiful or startling lines Carson wrote. I hope to read more of her work soon.

Msmurphybylaw says

Most people who know me through work or socially find my cynicism biting yet funny. I get compliments often on my wit, though it is dark and sharp. I'm surprised when people tell me that I'm quite entertaining, because I tend withdrawal and am generally introverted. I have psychological test to back this up. I am forever the INTJ. Sometimes bordering on the J, but never the I.

This review contains, what may seem an infinite narcissistic hall of mirrors, reflecting Fibonacci images of big ol' Al, but that is what the book did for me.

It brought ME out.

Every page was exquisite and I can only describe my feelings that emoted while reading this book as paper-thin alabaster porcelain. It may be hard to grasp this tactile description, but the best way to put it is: bone-hard-butterfly-delicate. Maybe glass heart would be the best description.

I'm losing you.

Unique bits of virgin emotion or unearthed buried crap needing to bubble up and work itself out through prose or verse wriggled through the chapters slowly fingering my synapses tricking me to believe again in art.

Here is the best part to hear me out and my reflective side: I'm a pretty rough around the edges kinda manly-Momma. I wasn't always this way, but life happens. I'm pessimistic and fuck the water in the glass; I don't care how many angels can dance on the head of a freaking pin, but this book of verse touched me. It reached into my teeniest of tiny air sacks and breathed life into them. It rearranged my current mindset and shook my perspective to its core.

I like that.

I like that a book can do that.

That I can become:

An admirer of romance

Embracing of Tragedies

Tolerant of love triangles

A patron of the Tango, even if it is not for everyone

A lover of Lava Bread

Blinded because I still think Helen may be a whore

I read a lot of books and when I find myself skipping pages in them and falling into the negative camp or I feel myself drifting towards the blues, I read a passage or two from Red. Close the book, breath in deeply

and softly stroke the cover feeling revived.

Jessica says

I read this book when I was about twenty, and it was the greatest thing that I'd ever read. Then I purposely avoided rereading it for over a decade after that, terrified that it couldn't be as incredible as I remembered.

So recently I did have to reread it, for school. And no, it didn't do to me what it did the first time that I read it, and it no longer seems light years greater than any other book in human history. HOWEVER, it is still really great and one of my all-time favorites, and I'd recommend it to pretty much anyone, especially if you have any feeling at all in your heart for classicism. I wish it weren't cliché to say that Anne Carson is a goddess. Anne Carson is a goddess, and were I ever to build a temple or sacrifice mammals it would be to her.

Andrew Tibbetts says

This novel was written for me, it feels. It has the perfect blend of funny and sad, raw and elegant, intellectual and sensual. It blew my mind when I read it. And it's the one of only two books I've re-read several times (Great Expectations being the other.)

There are some clever metafictional framing sections which come at the material from historical and literary angles, but the central section, the heart of the book, is the story, the novel in verse.

"Verse" in Anne Carson isn't strident metrical regularity or forced rhyme, but merely prose that fine tuned and broken into lines. It's stunningly beautiful. Her highly original way with words is bracing.

The story is a retelling of the myth of Hercules and Geryon, the red monster who he kills in one of his labours, as a modern gay romance. Geryon is still a red monster but he's also a sensitive young man who falls in love with impulsive, heroic Hercules, a kind of trailor trash revolutionary.

The book has the melancholy, romantic voluptuousness of Thomas Mann or Carson McCullers pressed through the distilling crackle of T.S. Eliot's literate virtuosity. It manages to be Apollonian and Dionysian. Playful, powerful. Hard, soft. Hopeless, hopeful. There isn't a more successful fusion of opposites in literature.

Laurie Neighbors says

Oh, you should read this book. It's smart and sweet and tender and original. It's erotic, but just under your skin. It's a novel in verse, but don't let that deter you. You can pick it up off the shelf and settle into a big armchair in the bookstore and read the whole thing for free in an hour (even relishing and re-reading parts). But then you'll probably want to buy it anyway so that you can take it home and sleep with it under your pillow for the rest of your life.

Bina says

This hybrid novel / epic poem is one of my favorites. It wreaked havoc on my life, mostly in a good way.

Based on the Greek myth of Herakles (Hercules for all you Romans), it recasts Geryon, the slayed, shepherding red-winged monster, as a protagonist who also takes form as a gay, socially-marginalized school boy. From the monster's perspective, a story unfolds that is at once disturbing, coruscating, and beautiful.

The way Carson shapes verse awes me, you want to touch her craft, know its contours like a welder's wrought iron.

Some of her lines ring in my head, years after reading: "Reality is a sound; you have to tune into it, not just keep yelling."

Pewterbreath says

Not in a long time have I obsessively read anything, just to want to obsessively re-read it all in one fell swoop. There's two parts to this book: first is the meta-writing bit--poem fragments and the like from the original Hercules myth, a writer who goes blind for insulting Helen, and then regains his sight again for rescinding his comment (how very political) and the like. This part is good (not great--just good).

It's the story itself that is absolutely wonderful. Anne Carson is good at many things: making a good turn of phrase (someone "falls out of the room like an olive off a plate"), good at weaving themes in and out of a narrative (her theme is good too: stories erode. That's it, but as simple as the theme can be stated, it leads to fascinating conclusions), but first and foremost she is exceptionally talented at understanding people. This is may be a pomo pseudo-pseudo myth, but the moments described are so intimate and private she manages to escape the depersonalization that many myths entail.

She has given long narrative verse a shot in the arm, that's for sure--I can't think of many instances where an author has so willfully chosen a "difficult" medium and successfully made it so approachable. I couldn't recommend this more.

Pavle says

ʔudno. Jako ʔudno, ali u potpuno pozitivnom smislu. Na tren mitološka dekonstrukcija, na tren metafori?ka rekonstrukcija jednog malog deli?a Herkulove legende, iz druge, beskrajno interesantnije perspektive. Pri?a o osetljivim, li?nim temama, o identitetu i ljubavi, o umetnosti i odrastanju i kako smrt tj. ubistvo ne mora biti bukvalno. Ne?u da zalazim u detalje same pri?e, pošto je ona ovde na drugom mestu. Dovoljno je re?i kako se radi o malom crvenom de?aku, a posle mladi?u, koji ima krila i koji je neraskidivno povezan sa vulkanima.

Možda je ono po ?emu se na prvi pogled ovaj roman (ili jedna duga pesma) isti?e je struktura: roman u stihu. Ali meni se iskreno više ?ini da je to svojevrsno opravdanje za lepršavost teksta i izostanak bilo kakve ?vrste forme.

En Karson piše izrazito lirično, ali vrlo smisleno, ništa nije suvišno i sve je bitno. Značaj teksta je nešto sakriven, ali jednom kada se pronadje, u pitanju je nešto posebno.

5

Edward says

If this is poetry, then I guess I don't really understand
what poetry is.
If it's not about rhyme, or meter, sound, or the controlled use of precise, flowing,
poetic language,
then it seems to resemble prose exactly, but with arbitrary
line-breaks,
which does not preclude it from being a beautiful story
about heartbreak,
and growing up, one that is deeply moving, and filled with powerful
imagery,
just that I felt distracted by the form, driven to constantly question
why it is written
in this way: perhaps in imitation and homage to the original work
of Stesichoros,
but then why forsake all of the basic elements of poetry, that make it sing,
and give it power?

Aubrey says

*It was taking him a very long while
to set up the camera. Enormous pools of a moment kept opening around his hands
each time he tried to move them.*

Every so often my education comes in handy when I am confronted by a piece that does not seize me by the heart and wring it till I weep like it has apparently done for most everyone else. One could say peer pressure,

or one could admit to capitalism and how a measure of discipline is needed in analyzing any work that is mandated, regardless of personal adoration. Besides, this is one of those works that I really need to go back and reread The Iliad and The Odyssey and co. for, albeit I dislike necessitating the swallowing of the same old canon for a work that should stand on its own, albeit there's many a confabulation of myth and written and blasphemy tickling my brain that I would so like to pin down to the count, albeit what the hell am I doing in the major of English if I want to forgo more reading for reading's sake, so. Sometimes the internal to-and-fro works like these provoke is worth the cost of purely academic parsing alone.

What have you written that could strike you blind? Not lie or truth but sacrilege, much like that fine line between fanfiction and kindred souls of Pulitzer Prize winners that so troubled a professor when I responded to his offer of The Hours with lack of interest. I'd believe there was a difference in type rather than quality were the halls not so full of Shakespeare and Milton and those who knew what one should steal in order to enjoy the better legacy of Prometheus. Go big, go ancient, go poetic and/or historical, go foundering on the threat of military might or the wracking of the very own soul, the mind of a male of red-rued means that bypasses death for the photo volcano and finds a refuge, like so many of us, in art. Perhaps not from love, or wings, or child on child sexual assault, but from real to representation nonetheless. There's reasons why Plato banished the stuff.

I didn't like this as much as The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos. Course, I was reading poetry a lot more regularly back then, so I may be thinking myself set on track while in reality dangling preciously off the back of the horse. Still, I can appreciate the feeling of the need to pay tribute in whys and wherefores that take wordselves far more seriously than the world deems fit to grant. Imagine all those objects rising up against their subjects and tearing eyes from their sockets. What a riot.

*People, thought Geryon,
for whom life
is a marvelous adventure. He moved off into the tragicomedy of the crowd.*